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Nation A Warrior Elite For the Dirty Jobs

America's growing Special Forces seek a role

In military jargon they are called "low-intensity conflicts." More commonly they are known as "dirty little wars." By any name they are the kinds of battles most likely to be fought by U.S. troops in a precarious nuclear age: rescuing hostages from terrorism, fighting guerrillas or teaching allies how to fight them, protecting disparate American interests in a variety of regions.

These unorthodox struggles require a special type of soldier: bold and resourceful, often trained in the black arts of stealth and sabotage, suitable for an elite unit that can vanish into alien territory or strike anywhere with speed and surprise. Recent events have underscored the need for such mobile, small-scale fighting units. As Americans abroad have become increasingly vulnerable to terrorist attacks like the Christmas-week atrocities in Rome and Vienna, Washington has recognized more than ever the utility of a quick and certain response. At the same time, the Reagan Administration has placed increased emphasis on a "new globalism" designed to assert U.S. interests abroad by providing covert and overt assistance to rebels fighting Soviet-backed regimes around the world.

Deciding just how the U.S. should go about organizing and deploying such Special Forces has provoked a fierce debate in the corridors of the Pentagon and in secret congressional hearings over the past few months. When he went West for New Year's, President Reagan took with him a secret report from the Holloway Commission, a White House task force set up six months ago to explore new ways of fighting terrorism. Next week the debate will spill into the open, as Secretary of State George Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger join more than 100 experts to discuss the future of low-intensity conflict at a symposium at Fort McNair in Washington.

Every U.S. President since John F. Kennedy has preferred, whenever possible, to use the scalpel of a Special Forces operation rather than the blunter tools of conventional warfare. The Reagan Administration has given top priority to building up Special Forces, increasing their budget from \$441 million in 1982 to \$1.2 billion this year, and the number of troops from 11,000 to nearly 15,000. At the very least, the Administration has rescued

special operations from the post-Viet Nam era of neglect, which was so ignominiously exposed in the wreckage of Desert One during the failed Iranian hostage rescue mission of 1980.

The military command, however, has been a good deal less enthusiastic about this new breed of warrior. Special Forces are often regarded by the brass as unworthy of precious defense dollars and a bit too independent to boot. Disclosures last November that members of the supersecret Delta Force had been charged with skimming covert intelligence funds only heightened Pentagon suspicions that the Special Forces are a bunch of freebooters. Shrugged retired Army Brigadier General Donald Blackburn, an expert on unconventional warfare: "Special Forces have always been the bastards of the Army."

Partly as a result of this attitude, America's Special Forces are still woefully unprepared for the challenges they could face. Though it is far more likely that the U.S. would use its handful of quick-reaction shock troops rather than any of its 17 active Army divisions or 13 Navy carrier battle groups, special operations still receive less than 1% of the Pentagon's \$300 billion budget. Warns Jeffrey Record, a respected expert on military affairs: "I have no doubt that low-intensity conflict is the sort of scenario we'll be fighting in coming decades. What I do doubt is that we'll be prepared."

Congress has found that the combat readiness of U.S. Special Forces is far below acceptable levels and that equipment shortages, despite the recent infusion of dollars, are getting worse. A 1980 investigation into the Desert One fiasco faulted the Pentagon for having available only eight specially equipped helicopters to transport the rescue force when "at least" ten were needed. Today the Air Force has only seven. Although the Pentagon has ordered ten more, "the main transport programs are hopelessly behind schedule and over cost," charges Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia, ranking Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee. "We are only slightly more prepared to carry out the Iranian hostage rescue mission today than we were when it failed."

Pentagon records show that over the past five years more than half the Special Forces units have earned readiness ratings of no better than C-3, meaning "marginally ready." (C-1 is "fully ready," C-2 "substantially ready," C-4 "not ready.") "The bulk of the units are C-3 and below," one Pentagon official told TIME. Said another: "The readiness has been atrocious."

For one unit in particular, readiness has not been as big a problem as simple logistics. Based at Fort Bragg, N.C., the Army's elite Delta Force has been too far from recent targets of terrorism to play a role. By the time Delta Force troops reached the Mediterranean to respond to the seizure of TWA Flight 847 last June and the hijacking of the EgyptAir flight to Malta in November, they were too late for a successful rescue operation. One of the Holloway Commission's recommendations is for the "forward deployment" of some special-operations forces and equipment overseas.

Reaganauts in the Defense Department accuse the uniformed brass of paying only lip service to the need to build up U.S. Special Forces. In early December, for example, the Air Force canceled an annual inspection of the First Special Operations Wing, at Hurlburt Field, Fla. Officially, bad weather was blamed for the cancellation. The real reason, according to the monthly *Armed Forces Journal*, all eleven helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft were down for repairs.

Special Forces play several different roles. In a conventional war, small teams of a dozen men are supposed to penetrate behind enemy lines, blend in with the natives and cut off lines of supply and communication. To train friendly forces in the art of guerrilla warfare, the Army has sent hundreds of teams to 60 nations in the past six years—more than twice as many as it sent overseas during a comparable period in the 1970s.

Other Special Forces, like the Army's Rangers, are lightly equipped shock troops parachuted in to seize air bases and key installations before the heavily armored main force arrives. The Navy's SEALs (Sea, Air, Land forces) would be stealthily deployed to blow up bridges and ships. The Air Force's First Special Oper-

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